

# Willis E. Sullivan: From Cotton Club to Code Commission

Lindsey Hanks

In July of 1986, Willis E. Sullivan sat down with Madeline Buckendof and recorded his oral history for the historical archive of the law firm Hart & Holland. His family history along with changes in the practice of law made for an interesting oral history.

During the height of the Great Depression millions were looking for work. In the summer of 1932 Willis E. Sullivan had just graduated from the Stanford University with a degree in journalism. He moved back to Boise having received a job offer from the Idaho Daily Statesman. Willis went to work Monday morning only to realize the Boise National Bank closed. His employer couldn't pay the staff. Instead of waiting around for the banks to sort out their problems, he decided to go to law school.

He had always toyed around with the idea of law school. Willis's Grandfather, Isaac Newton Sullivan, was the first chief justice in Idaho and his two children, one of whom is Willis's father, were lawyers. He recalls listening to his father and grandfather, "argue and scream and yell at each other" about all sorts of things. He figured being a lawyer could be fun.

For the next three years, Willis attended Harvard Law School, terrified of his professors. The teaching staff's vast knowledge was intimidating and the professors enjoyed scaring the students. He enjoyed his courses and was able to learn a lot. Most of his time was spent study-

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ing and working at the legal aid office. Working at the legal aid office allowed him to apply what he was learning. When Willis wasn't studying or working, he and his friends would go to New York City on the weekends. The boys spent their time at taxi dances, clubs where men would buy tickets and a woman would dance with them for one song per ticket, until they closed for the night. Then they would head over to Harlem and spend the rest of the evening at the Cotton Club listening to Cab Calloway, the famous jazz singer and band leader.

Once he was done with law school he interviewed at firms in New York City. When those didn't work he purchased a ticket advertised on a bulletin board. Someone was selling the other half of a round trip ticket from New York to San Francisco on a boat going through the Panama Canal. He interviewed with firms in Los Angeles and San Francisco, but he made up his mind he wanted to come back to Boise. When he moved to Boise he worked with William Langriose, his cousin's husband, and his Uncle Laverne Sullivan's firm. He spent time working with his uncle and his grandfather, who was retired but still hung around the office.

While working at the firm he remembers his first and last trial case. The client was the owner of the Idaho Candy Company whose manager absconded with a bunch of money. The company wanted it recovered. Unfortunately, Willis lost the case. Willis laughs as he remembers the owner telling him, he was a smart guy, but will never be a trial man. He agreed with this statement because he hated every minute in the courtroom. He says trials are for extroverts and he is an introvert.

As an introvert he liked to work by himself doing research, which is the thing he loved most about his career. He would do all the research and his partner, Langriose, who hated books, would handle court appearances. He would also do research for other lawyers in the valley. He loved reading through cases and finding support for his position. It was fun. Willis and Langriose would both work out the trial plans together then Willis would write up the briefs.

During Willis's years of law practice he saw quite a bit of change going on in the legal community. When he started out lawyers were not allowed to advertise. The only form of advertising was word of mouth. It was considered unprofessional to formally advertise and you

could be disbarred for advertising. He still considers it unprofessional. Another change was lawyers moving towards specialization. Companies started hiring more lawyers with specialization, which caused firms to get bigger. Willis feared he would get bored if he had one focus. He enjoyed general practice. He would have a variety of cases, and knew a little about everything.

Having loved being a lawyer he did have some frustrations. The greatest frustration he faced was when his eyes went bad, eliminating his ability to do research and forcing him into early retirement. This was something that still frustrated him at the time of the interview. Willis was also disappointed because he never had the opportunity to be a judge. He even applied for the U.S. Court of appeals in San Francisco, but didn't get it.

Willis didn't have the opportunity to be a judge, but he had the opportunity to be on the Idaho Code Commission which handles the publication of new laws. He was on this commission for years and really enjoyed the work. He was also the president of the Idaho State Bar. He loved travelling around the state and meeting different lawyers. Willis said he is very happy with his life and his practice.

Willis died in 2013.

#### About the Author

**Lindsey Hanks** is a senior at Boise State University and spent the summer as an intern for the Idaho State Bar. She is studying for her bachelor's in English.



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